

**History of the “Church of the East”, also know as “Nestorian Church”,
“Persian Church”, “East Syrian Church”, “Chaldean Syrian Church”
(in India only), “Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East”,
“Assyrian Church of the East”**

The **Assyrian Church of the East** was established in Edessa in the first century of the Christian era. It is from Edessa that the message of the Gospels spread. Edessa was a small kingdom, a buffer state between Roman and Parthean Empires. Mar Mary was sent to Persia by his fellow workers in Edessa. In the second century this Church began to be organized. The Church in Edessa had four Gospels in Aramaic. The teaching was spread to the Persian Empire. In the third century, the Church in the Persian Empire had to take refugees from the Roman Empire where Christians were not welcomed. Streams of refugees turned toward Persia to escape persecution in the Eastern Roman Empire. A great multitude of Christians in all Roman provinces were put off by various punishments, torture professed to renounce Christianity.

From about 280 A.D. Mar Papa organized this Church, thus Metropolitan seat of Seleucia became the headquarters. Now the city is in ruins, known as SalmanPark, 30 miles from Baghdad.

Mar Aprim the Assyrian, the representative of the Church in the first ecumenical council at Nicea in 325 A.D., played a great role in the literary and religious life of all Christians until today. That is the reason he is recognized by the Roman Catholic Church which declared Saint Aprim as the doctor of the Universal Church.

In the fifth century, the Nestorian controversy concerning the unity of the divine and human nature in Christ had far reaching consequences. At this time, the Church of the East was not involved in this controversy. It was a theological dispute within the Roman Empire.

John Nestorius was not an Assyrian nor did he know Syriac language. He was a native of Antioch and Patriarch of Constantinople from 428 to 431 A.D. His rival Cyril was Patriarch of Alexandria. Therefore, the members of the Church say that they do not have anything to do with the Nestorian controversy. It was several years later and even after the death of Nestorius in 451 A.D. that the Christians of the Persian Empire heard about the controversy. They decreed that the stand taken by Nestorius was in agreement with the view always maintained by the Church of the East.

As a result of the persecution of the followers of Nestorius, many Christians had to flee from the now Christian Roman Empire and found refuge among the followers of this Church.

The headquarters of the Church, Selucia-Ctesphon, was at a strategic place on both banks of the River Tigris, the center of travel between Europe and Asia. By the middle of the sixth century, the Church had spread into Egypt, Syria, Arabia, Mesopotamia, Persia, India, Ceylon, China, and Mongolia. [...]

Wherever they went, it was to preach, to teach and cure. At the end of the eleventh century, this Church was the single largest Christian denomination at that time. John Stewart writes: “Whole peoples with their rulers had become Christians and it seems certain that there were few places in the whole Asia that were not reached at some time or other as the outcome of the marvelous activity of that wonderful Church which extended from China to Jerusalem and Cyprus, and in the eleventh century is said to have outnumbered the Greek and Roman Churches combined”.

From the Pacific Ocean in the East to the Mediterranean in the West; from the Black Sea and Siberia to the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea, Assyrian missions were working. Asia Minor, Cyprus, Egypt, Palestine, Mesopotamia, Arabia, Persia, Afghanistan, India, China, Japan, Mongolia, Manchuria, and Turkistan-all hand missions where the Gospel was taught by zealous workers of the Assyrian Church of the East.

The Assyrian Church missionaries included bishops, priests, monks, deacons. It is said about these men – the messengers of the King of kings – that they were as gently as lambs and unassuming, but courageous and fearless with the hearts of lions. They sacrificed life and health in the unknown land and did their work among the heathen with faith and trust in God. They went out from Mesopotamia, the birthplace of Abraham, the father of all the believers. [...]

Around the fourteenth century, this missionary enterprise started to decline. There was persecution, deception, extermination by Mongols. The remnant which escaped the persecution of Tamerlane finally found refuge in the mountains of Kurdistan. The split caused by Sulaqa who took refuge with the Roman Catholic Church, persecuted by the Kurds and Turks, and during the First World War further weakened this Church.

At the turn of the century, and during the outbreak of the world war, Assyrians entered an era of new hostilities. Villages were burned, churches plundered. Hundreds of precious old Christological books, looted, and destroyed with few reaching the worlds famous museums.

The act of heroism that these few fierce fighters the Assyrian mountaineers exhibited is seldom seen in history, fighting their way through savages and fanatics. The shocking horror stories of mass murders are still remembered by every Assyrian family.

The impact of twentieth century fell heavy upon these Christians, depriving them from their ancestral land and leaving them now scattered more than ever before. Wherever they went they clustered to each other, and found communities still adhering to their old faith, in Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Kuwait, Greece, Italy, Sweden, Russia, U.S.A., Canada and Australia.

This general decadence of the Church made her forget its past missionary heritage. The decline of the monastic movement also contributed to the total annihilation of the missionary movement in this “most missionary Church the world has ever seen”, the Church that almost converted Mongols to Christianity. Still signs to hope are becoming visible recently among the young men who feel in their blood the call for work. The Church continues to have a new expansion with goals to teach Assyrian rising generations the messianic teaching on the customs and traditions of our forefathers and to keep alive Aramaic (Syriac) a language which our Lord Jesus Christ offered his first sacrifice of Eucharist.

It is certain that these people comprise the world’s most ancient Churches and maintained many of their old traditions. They remained isolated throughout the centuries thus preserving the once famous **Aramaic language**, and lived as if in Biblical times in their picturesque villages, they worship very much the same way as was done two thousand years ago. The ceremonies in churches and monasteries are exceedingly impressive.

The Church of the East received the Scriptures from the hands of the blessed Apostles themselves in Aramaic original the language of Palestine at the time of our Lord Jesus Christ and that **Aramaic Bible “Peshitta”** is the text of the Church of the East which has come from Biblical times without any change or revision. We hope that the imperishable memory of the innumerable company of martyrs of the Church of the East who lived and died in the light of eternity will provide an incentive to all Churches toady and to the members of this ancient Church, the heirs of this great tradition.

The Theology of the Church of the East is strictly based on the Bible [...]. It is Apostolic and Catholic, and has remained unchanged throughout its history. Its doctrine of the Holy Trinity is in conformity with that of the Council of Nicea, at which it was represented.

As regards the mystery of the dispensation of Our Lord and God, Jesus Christ, it professes Him in two natures; namely, divine and human in two *Qnume* [nb: *Qnuma*, is an Aramaic word. The nearest equivalent is the Greek “hypostasis”, in Latin “substantia” and in English “substance”]; namely, hypostasis, or underlying substances, in one person of the Son of God. One will, one authority. These two natures

are united eternally and inseparably. It rejects the term “Theotokos” or “Mother of God” used for the Blessed Virgin. It holds that the term has no Scriptural authority, is liable to misunderstanding, and therefore can lead to error. It maintains that while the One Holy Apostolic and Catholic Church is the guardian of the Faith, and has full authority granted it by its Lord and Master through the power of the Holy Spirit, to preach the Gospel to all mankind and to interpret the meaning of the Scriptures to the faithful; yet has no right to teach any doctrine that has no Scriptural authority. In words of St. Paul the Apostle: “But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any gospel to you than that which we have preached to you, let him be ‘khrim’ (anathema)”.

The theology of the Church of the East has been stated briefly and clearly in the following **Hymn of Praise** (*Teshbokhta*), written by **Mar-Babai the Great**, a noted theologian of the Church, and which is:

One is Christ, the Son of God,
Worshipped by all in two natures;
In His Godhead begotten of the Father,
Without beginning, before all time;
In his Humanity born of Mary,
In the fullness of time, in a body united.
Neither His Godhead, is of the nature of the Mother,
Nor His Humanity of the nature of the Father;
The natures are preserved in their Qnumas,
In one person of one Sonship.
And as the Godhead is three substances in one nature,
Likewise the Sonship of the Son is in two natures, one person.
So the Holy Church has taught.

The Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East, however, to this day is commonly known to our Western Christian Brethren as the “Nestorian” Church. This misnomer has led them generally to think that this Church has established by Saint Nestorius, and that it received its teaching from his followers. The so-called Nestorian doctrine has been erroneously or deliberately interpreted by its opponents to mean the belief of two persons in Christ. These allegations, of course, have their origin in the Council of Ephesus. This issue, however, has since been much clarified by various Protestant and also some Roman Catholic scholars. [...]

As to the Assyrian Church of the East, however, because they would not change their true faith, but kept it as they received it from the Apostles, they were unjustly styled “Nestorians”, since Nestorius was not their Patriarch, neither did they understand his language; but when they heard that he taught the doctrine of the two Natures and two *Qnume*, one will, one Son of God, one Christ, and that he confessed the orthodox faith, they bore witness to him, because they themselves held the same faith. Nestorius, then, followed them, and not they him, and that more especially in the matter of the appellation “Mother of Christ”. Therefore when called upon to excommunicate him, they refused, maintaining that their excommunication of Nestorius would be equivalent to their excommunication of the Sacred Scriptures and the Holy Apostles, from which they received what they professed, and for which we are censured together with Nestorius.

(Notice taken from: <http://nestorian.org/>)